

***Civil Rights History Project  
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program  
under contract to the  
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture  
and the Library of Congress, 2013***

Interviewee: Ben Caldwell  
Interview Date: April 11, 2013  
Location: Los Angeles, California  
Interviewer: Dr. David Cline  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 02:07:24

John Bishop: We're rolling.

David Cline: Alright. You want to just start?

John Bishop: Yep.

David Cline: You ready?

Ben Caldwell: Ready? Yeah.

David Cline: Okay, great.

John Bishop: So, this is the eleventh.

David Cline: Okay. So, marker: Today is Thursday, April eleventh, 2013. We are in Los Angeles, California, recording on behalf of the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Library of Congress. The interviewer today is David Cline. Our videographer is John Bishop.

And we are here with Mr. Ben Caldwell. Thank you very much for agreeing to be part of our project.

Ben Caldwell: Well, I'm excited about the prospects of this museum in Washington, D.C. I lived there for about three years and taught at Howard and worked at the Smithsonian with Bernice Reagon and them, and got to meet with Mr. Alan Lomax at our house and talk about the blues with a good friend of mine, who—Mr. Barlow, Dr. Barlow, who was the “doctor of the blues,” WPFW. And so, he used to have that every night, so he would bring through all these phenomenal blues musicians and people. So, I felt pretty blessed in that I was able to put my ethnographic hat on, you know, and really meet a lot of people in those ways. So, it was really a pretty fun time in my life.

DC: Great.

JB: How about Worth Long? Did you meet him, too?

DC: Yeah, I met Worth Long. Now, Mr. Worth Long and them, I met in Philadelphia and also in Flaherty Film Seminars. And I got to see *The Land Where the Blues Was Born (Began)* and was really blown away by it, because it was—you know, I'm from New Mexico. And so, and my father was a foreman on the train line. And so, I was around a lot of that work music that you guys documented in *The Land Where the Blues Was Born (Began)*. So, just that lining up the chains and “*uhm-chang*” and then just, and including all that kind of stuff that was the environmental sounds with the music itself really showed me—because that's the work, the kind of world I was around as a kid.

So, to start out with my life, my grandfather and my mom and a whole family set were migrant farmers. And my grandfather was a kind of a lighter-skinned black man, and he could pass as a Latino when he wanted to, so he worked in Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico,

Arizona, and then their migratory pattern was always that, following the lines to Bakersfield here.

DC: Where was he born originally?

BC: Texas.

DC: Okay.

BC: Texas was the part of the life that they were from. And they traveled with—it was two men and a woman, and they could do everything. They could build houses. I was very empowered with my grandfather's capacity to do things, and he had never even—he didn't even have a formal education. He bought up a lot of property in the town that he settled in. And the only reason he settled is his tent burned down, and they had to stay there in that town. [Laughter] And they figured out how to make it work.

And so, a lot of my grandfather, I find as I get older, is a lot in me, because he was my babysitter. And he was a powerbroker, because I remember walking behind him, meeting the mayor. And I had real clear access to going to City Hall, and just walking there as a baby, I can just still, you know, like just—so that whole—parts of those small town and accessibility and things like that I was able to see.

Also, the dichotomy. My grandfather was a projectionist. And he projected in a town that had the Latinos separated from the whites, so there was a Latino theater that he projected at, and then he would run across the street and project at the white theater. And then, there was a specific place at the time where “blacks only” kind of had to be at the top in the balcony.

DC: Right. And where was that?

BC: In Demming, New Mexico.

DC: Okay.

BC: And Demming—I started doing just research the last few years of my life, these last few years. It's been really pretty interesting to deal with the concept of that town, because it was named Demming. It was named Demming after the [0:05:00] folks, the Crocker family. And the Crocker family—the woman who married them, her maiden name was Demming. And Demming, New Mexico, was the border between Mexico and the U.S. before the Guadalupe Hidalgo. So, our part of that world is quite unique. So, it was Guadalupe Hidalgo. It was the last mainland part of the United States that came in. And that Poncho Villa, Geronimo, Cochise, the Butterfield Trail, all of those things kind of ran through our town, which is pretty interesting. And that it was airplanes were first used in war, General Pershing.

DC: Do you think the fact that it's such a, sort of a border place, where things are in flux, or, you know, being defined in that way, had an influence on how you grew up?

BC: I think so, because I was at the crux of a crazy place of change, you know, and there was a lot of stories. You know, it was just a whole lot of stories. If we just went out in Boy Scouts, the stories were these Indian—so, our guide was almost—my Scoutmaster was like an ethnographic studier, you know. He was a geologist in ways, because we would go out, and he was like, “This is where Cochise and the military would fight at this pass.” And so, he would, you know, make—you know, I'd dream about it. And then, you know, “This is the way that Geronimo was able to live in the desert, because we had those types of things around us.” And, you know, Poncho Villa and Zapata were the Latino people that—they really liked him a whole lot. And so, there was—

And then, my grandfather was a baseball fanatic, and so he had a colored team. So, he had Indians, Asians, blacks, all playing throughout the Southwest as a baseball team. So, there

was that kind of barnstorming that—and I was their little batboy and stuff, you know, so I got that kind of environment. So, yeah—

DC: Who would they play against?

BC: They played against other colored groups.

DC: Okay.

BC: [Laughs] You know?

DC: Yeah, yeah.

BC: There was this whole circuit that they had that were semiprofessionals, and it was a part of the—before they became, you know, when it was really segregated. So, it was the tail end of all that segregated time period that I was able to see.

DC: That's absolutely fascinating. So, this would be throughout the Southwest?

BC: Yeah. Because, see, my grandfather's pattern would be Texas, up to northern New Mexico, and then, what would be eastern Arizona. So, that was their playing pattern, and they had their own designations of what the different levels were. And then, after—some of our guys would then go to the semipro leagues and then, you know, kind of work themselves up. And it was fun to watch them, pretty famous, you know—they were famous within their own world, you know—to come in after church. Some of them would, like, be dressed up in a suit still, you know, because they're late—on time—you know, late before, but the game's just starting. Just be, you know, like, the pitcher—I remember the pitcher coming out with, you know, like with his tie on, tucking it around his neck, and then like throwing the shit—so hard, you know.

[Laughter] It was just a kind of a fun environment to see these men.

The other part of my life that was interesting is really, to me, is that I was the designated driver for my father. And my father was an interesting man because he was a foreman. That's

how he got to New Mexico. And he was a highly intelligent man, you know. He was like born in Des Moines, Iowa. His family was middle class. He went to the church—you know, he went to Catholic schools and all that, and got all the way up to college and went to—what is it? Marquette University.

DC: Oh, wow.

BC: So, he was that kind of a cat and living in that type of a world, which was, you know, with mostly migrant folks that, you know, kind of pioneering types. Because people who migrated to New Mexico were people who were just pioneers, you know, they just went out and struck out on their own.

And so, I got to see the blues being made just by just really everyday people. You know, so I got to see that, was really pretty impressed. And storytellers, I got to meet some really phenomenal storytellers, the ones that did the signifying monkeys and all that type of stuff. I got to hear that alive and well and was really blown away with it as a kid. Because I remember trying to describe it, [0:10:00] but then, the closest I could come was, you know, that one that Disney did with Uncle—[sings] “That’s what Uncle Remus said.”

But these cats were like—they would drink and, you know, like, grab a rattlesnake. And really, I saw a guy grab a rattlesnake and kill the motherfucker while he was telling the story! [Laughing] So, it was that kind of realness around my life, you know. So, he’s telling “Signifying Monkey,” and then this sidewinder comes up, and he just like grabs it and then like [makes grinding noise]. And then, as a kid, I was like, “How fantastic!”

DC: That’ll make an impression!

BC: That’s storytelling and a half there!

DC: Yeah. So, he was a foreman in what industry?

BC: In the railroad.

DC: With the railroad?

BC: Railroad line, yeah. And I—that was the other thing I looked up in my life. I lived some of my former life in a boxcar, you know. So, it was kind of like the boxcar—I remember having those first steps made of metal, you know, grabbing my arms, going up to get into the boxcar, yeah. Pretty impressed about—so, that was part of my life. So, that's the early life, and then—

DC: And you said you were the designated driver for your father?

BC: For my dad, yeah. That was by the time I turned sixteen. But I think the whole thing on civil rights, the thing that I really—in New Mexico, it was the cusp, a real cusp of change there. Because at that time, like I was saying, they had things that were still segregated, because the Latinos had their thing, and then, there was whites and blacks together on the theater level.

DC: And what—just to interrupt, what year were you born?

BC: In 1945.

DC: In 1945, so we're talking about—when you're saying “those times,” when are—?

BC: Fifties, early fifties, from '45. Yeah, because it was like, since he was—he babysitted me for the early parts of my life, so I would say from 1945ish till 1955ish is where I spent the greater part of like kicking it with him, part of ten years, you know, for those ten years.

And then, later, our family still got engaged with the theater, because then my grandfather then projected for the drive-in movies. You know, so he was a part of that, too, and so we would go and see those. So, I was always around the kind of movie world in all its manifestations, you know. Never thought it would be a part of my life, so just the whole thing of how it happened to me later.

But, let's see, so school—my first days of school were really pretty interesting, because I had learned to—actually, I was a pretty free-running kid because it was a free space. And so, the first days of school, I really—when they had recess and things, I disappeared. And then, they found out that I was leaving and going home, because I was like, “Why is everybody sleeping? I’m not sleepy.” And so, I’m like, “I’ll just go!” And so, I just went and went home.

And so, they discovered that I was going. And so, I stayed my first recess was after I had been in school for about a week or two. And then, all the kids all of a sudden noticed that I was there. Because they had done this kind of—what do they call it when they cut places up and only make it, like they had the Latinos all in one school?

DC: Oh, right.

BC: Segregated the place. And then, they made Smith School only for whites. And I happened to be one block on this side of the track instead of one block on the other. [Laughs] And so, I showed up at school, and it kind of like freaked them out.

DC: In an all-white school?

BC: In an all-white school. And so, I was the only black person in an all-white school, and it happened just through the line. I happened to be on one side of the railroad track instead—and so, when I showed up, the school freaked out. And the kids started throwing rocks at me and throwing dirt and just being pretty, just like living their parents’ life on me. And so, I then ran.

And then, later, I learned to fight for myself because my cousin was watching me. And he just looked at me kind of like evilly, like, “You’re not just running from this. You know how to fight. We taught you how to box and stuff.” So, I just turned around. And then, the funniest thing I still remember is that they say, “You fight like a nigger and you kick like a Mexican.” [Laughs] I said, “Definitely! What?! Come with it!”

And so, from then on, I was a jock. I learned how to play football and I would run over all those kids that really meant me harm. And I found out how to do it with gusto, and I became a jock. And so, my next twelve years was really pretty cool in New Mexico. [0:15:00]

DC: Did that earn you some sort of status or respect then?

BC: Very much so. The whole thing—even throughout, because, you know, it's pioneering people, and they ride horses and bronco bulls, [conversation begins in background] and the whole way that they live was very rough and ready. And I liked those guys. You know, they were fun friends of ours. And my grandfather was a, you know, Brahma bull—he liked the Brahma bulls and all that whole world, and we'd watch that. So, we had friends that were in the kind of cowboy rodeo world, too.

But with those folks, we just found the same thing. I had to teach my brothers the same thing as they grew up, is that as long as you stood up for yourself, they respect you. And so, that was the thing that each of them—and so, it was funny, my youngest one, we were talking about it, as I grew up—maybe we should close the door.

JB: Let me just stop the tape.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're going again.

BC: Okay. I guess I was just talking about that early life of mine. And—

DC: Were there other black families in the town?

BC: Yeah, there was about a hundred and fifty blacks in the town on a constant basis. And they were mostly migrant people, really wonderful people, very down to earth. They treated my family really well. I always got—we always got a kind of a real—people treated us nice, all

of our family. You know, like the black neighborhoods really treated us, really, like royalty. They treated us very nice, you know. [Sound of passing car]

DC: Why was that?

BC: They liked my father. He was highly intelligent man. We were a whole family and we're a proud family. [Sound of tires squealing] That sounds like a serious wreck.

JB: Yeah, we better stop.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

BC: I'll just start with after—that was kind of like my child life. And then—

DC: Can I ask you one more question about that?

BC: Sure.

DC: Because you started to talk about passing, sort of passing these lessons on to your brothers.

BC: Right.

DC: Yeah. And we didn't really hear about that.

BC: Okay, yeah. And with my brothers, what was interesting was like each of them had to deal with this idea of the pioneering white man, [laughs] you know. You know, how do you deal with that and their idea of what a black male is, you know? And so, part of what my father taught first was the sense of pride, you know, and you all stand up for each other kind of thing. And then, my sister—we had one sister, too, and she was the same kind of person.

So, we didn't stand for the n-word. It was like you say it, and before you knew it, your head was off. You know, that was our first concept, and my father was very much that type of a person. He really did not like cow-towing to people because of race. He didn't stand for it a little

bit and he didn't want us to ever be that kind of a person. So, that was the way we were taught, is that you're a man just like everybody else, and that really helped us a lot in a pioneering town.

DC: Um-hmm. That meant you had to keep proving that, I would imagine.

BC: Well, you only have to do it per generation. [Laughter] It's like they'll test the Caldwell, the next one, and see if you stand up like your brother did, and stuff like that.

DC: Okay.

BC: And then, the process of, if they did whip you, then they had to deal with your other brothers. You know, so that kind of thing is part of what we had as a kind of a family, a group of boys—and girl, because my sister was as strong as any of the guys that were around.

And so, for instance, my brother and I were talking, and I was like—because I got drafted. So, my youngest brother was like four or five years old when I first—well, no, he was about eight, nine, ten years old. And then, so, when I came back, he was about to go from junior high to college—I mean, high school, in those days. And so—anyway, so I was not around his life for about eight years. And so, he came and lived with me in D.C.

And so, we were just discussing, you know, like, “How did you deal with that incident when you had to deal with the cowboys?” You know, so, because they would—so, he was like, “Oh, yeah, that was the time when we went—” you know, because what would happen is they would go to the dry riverbed and have kegs of beer, and it was like a roundup, you know, really a lot of fun, [0:20:00] and people just had fun. And so, he found himself in the middle of all that [laughs] and he's like—and then, they all turned, and it's like, “Oh, there's a—!” And it was like, “Oh, we're gonna whip your ass,” kind of thing.

And so, he's like—I says, “Well, then what did you do?” He says, “I looked at the biggest one and I said, ‘I'm gonna knock the fuck out of him, and if he doesn't fall, I'm gonna

run!” [Laughter] He says, “Thank God, I hit him, and he fell down. And they’re like, ‘Ah, you’re good, man! Here, you wanna a damn beer?’” You know? And that’s just the way our life was. You had to really stand up for yourself and prove it, you know, and then people really respect you after that. So, that was just an example.

Another is like—the difference between the two worlds is like when some of my brothers came to see me here in California, they have a different way the police deal with you here, you know. And so, I told them you had to really, really chill. So, they left! [Laughs] You know? So, they really left and went back home. And then, when they were home—

DC: Meaning if you stood back up with that kind of self-respect—

BC: You would die! You would die. They would kill you, you know. And so, I was like, “You better just really chill when you’re here.” And so, they moved back home. And so, when they went back home, one of the cops from New Mexico jumped on Michael, who is this—he’s one of my brothers that don’t stand for any kind of shit. And so, they were going up side his head with a stick. And then, my sister grabbed the police and then attacked the police, and they both beat him up, [laughs] the cops, you know.

But in our hometown, because of how we were respected, we knew the judge. The judge then talked to them and says, “Come on.” The guy went to school with them, you know, so it just balanced out. So, whereas if it was here, they would have been dead or in prison still. You know? And so, that’s just the—so, in that town, we could live just like normal people, because it was a normal—I mean, what I mean by “normal” is nobody gets anything over anybody, but if you treat everybody right, you can be treated just like a regular American without that kind of onus that ends up—because that would have normally messed up our family forever, because the two of them would have been in prison.

DC: Right. That's not to say that that racism isn't there?

BC: Oh, no! It was still there, and to other black kids, it's there. You know, but for our family, because of how we treated everybody and how we were respected, we were able to pass through that. Because, you know, there were other kids that would have—that, if they had done the same thing, yeah, they would be in prison because they were black. But we were lucky enough for some reason to be respected enough to have that as a foible. So, I thought that was a very good example [laughs] of how we were as a family and respected in that town.

DC: Yeah, yeah. And then, you carried that with you when you went on to college, then?

BC: Throughout the world, yes. From then on, because even when I was in the Army. So, that was—when I first [left] home—I'll tell the pictures better. And this is when I—and it has a little bit of music, because it works better for me. [Music plays as he describes photos] And so, this is my mom and dad. And then, these early pictures are of me and my brothers, the “big ones,” as we call ourselves. And so, I first started video. My first stills were there. This is me as a young man in Vietnam. And so, I started, and these are the first photographs that I ever took as a kid, you know, the 21-year-old. And so, after being in that whole film world, the thing that was—

DC: Did you go straight from high school to being drafted?

BC: Yeah.

DC: Okay.

BC: Well, I had about six months in art school. I went to Arizona School of Art, and they drafted me out of the art school, because it was an art school and not a four-year school. And so, I was at a Disney school there in Arizona. And then, this is a picture of my sister. And I came back and just started shooting my family and the Arizona environment and the black people that

were in it. And so, I thought that I would make that my job is to really see, because I was noticing the tonalities and the sense of color in the skin—this is a self-portrait—of our skin was similar to the earth that was in the desert, and our skin rolled up like the bushes. So, there was a kind of an interesting look that our skin had in relationship, especially in black and white. So, I started playing around with the images in that manner.

DC: And this was after Vietnam?

BC: Yeah, this is right after Vietnam.

DC: Did Vietnam influence you to think in the way that—in terms of looking at the world, how you look at the world?

BC: It made me not look at the world with a veil. You know, that veil [0:25:00] was pulled off. And my religiousness disappeared, too, because at that time, um, um, they asked us to kill people, you know, the preachers. They were like—and I asked them, straight ahead, like, “It’s alright to kill?” And they were like, “Yeah.” I was like, “Damn!” [Laughs] You know? I was like, “I don’t know if I like you guys anymore,” you know, “because you’re not saying what we were taught.”

You know, do unto Caesar the things that are Caesar, and this is Caesar shit, you know. And the things to God is positive things. And I got to also see in a war zone that there were real humans there, you know, and we were only able to kill them because we made them “the other,” and I saw a lot of similarities with “the other” in me, you know. And I was “the other” in the United States, and they’re having me chase down “others” over here.

DC: I was going to ask you—I saw some images there of Vietnamese people.

BC: Yeah. And those Vietnamese ladies, young women, they kind of were following me. It was weird, because I would see them in a lot of different places. And, as you notice, there were

like two of them in each picture. And it tripped me out how—each place. And then, they would say, “Ben, I know you.” [Laughs] You know? So, they fucked with me as a 21-year-old. “I don’t know what in the world you guys—how can you know me? I just met you.” But they were like, “I know you.” They were fun. They were Montagnards, and Montagnards are the black people of that world. So, it was kind of interesting to see that.

The other thing politically, I got to see—I read Malcolm X there and I saw a lot of similarities between his life and mine, because he was raised in the Southwest and he had that Klan thing around him. And all the kinds of strifes and tribulations, like even his dad—my dad was that kind of a person, even though he wasn’t a Garveyite, but he was really a definite revolutionary, you know, in the sense of fighting for his life. And that always has bothered me when you’re proud of yourself that that’s considered revolutionary, you know.

DC: Right.

BC: And so, that’s the kind of dichotomy to me, is like I’ve never understood why me being prideful of my family and the people I’m from, but not to the point that it’s arrogance, just pride, you know, that that’s seen as being militant, because that’s something that I’ve always been, is just prideful. I don’t hate one culture over the other. I can get along with them. But I feel I’m equal to any other culture that meets me, you know. And I can point to my bad sides and I can point to our high sides, too, of the high cultures that we’ve created and things that we’re a part. It may not be here now, but it was a part of the culture and it meant a lot to the cultures that emulated it, you know. And so, that’s the way I see it. And my family has always pushed us like that. You know, be prideful of who you are and carry yourself in a manner therefore, you know.

DC: What was the world of the Army like?

BC: The Army.

DC: You know, coming out of where you came out of, in this very small town, and then thrust into, perhaps—I don't know if it was a different kind of a racial situation.

BC: Well, yeah. It was interesting for me, because I have a New Mexico accent, which is a non-accent. [Laughs]

DC: Right.

BC: You know, it's an unidentifiable accent. So, to fall in amongst a bunch of blacks who are from the South, then they're like, "Where are you from, man?" And I would say, "Mexico." "Oh, Mexican! Alright." [Laughter] You know? So, I mean, it was that kind of way. And I had a Mexican accent, because I did have a little carriage of Mexican language syntax in me at that time, because I was mostly around Latinos, so I had that and a little Span-English in my language, too.

But anyway, yeah, it was pretty—I was another person. I don't like being trapped, you know. And they trapped me, you know. And so, I was not a nice guy, you know. I was pretty angry and trapped and got to see how I would have been if I had been enslaved. I was really not good. And so—

DC: Um-hmm. Do you mean by the Army itself when you say "trapped"?

BC: Yeah, the Army, when they, you know, they drafted me and then they forced me—I thought I was going to be able to get out of it because I had trick knees. But they wanted me to operate on it and all they could do in those days is exploratory surgery. And I was like, "Hell, no! I'm not going to be explored on," because I like my torn ligaments. [Laughs] They'll patch up and heal themselves, you know. So, why do I have to do that? [0:30:00] And that was my young self fighting for my body at that time.

DC: Yeah.

BC: And so, lo and behold, when I was in the military, my knee went out. And so, I saw that as a godsend, and I used it as a way to get out of Nam. And so, I got out of Nam and I—I really pushed them and I ran into a real nice physician that looked at me and asked me how was I walking and put me—and made me an ambulatory patient from that point on. And so, then they shipped me to Japan, and I got to see Japan.

And then, while I was in Japan, the thing that I noticed with myself is I wanted to know who the power was. Who was the power that got my ass into this? You know? And so, when I was there, they—I was there in October, and so, Thanksgiving happened. And then, the American ambassador had an open invitation to some of the veterans, I mean, to some of the soldiers who were there. And everybody said, “Hell, no! I’m not going to the ambassador’s!” And I’m like, “I want to talk to him!” [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Yeah.

BC: So, I went there as a young man and got to eat Thanksgiving dinner with the American ambassador and talk to them about the issues of the war and what things were about and learned a whole lot. And so, I liked that so much that when it came up to have Christmas dinner with the, with the general of our base, I did that, too. And so, I jumped on that, and he happened to be one of the guys that was over the whole theater before the guy, Westmoreland. And so, I got to sit down and talk with him over, you know, Christmas dinner.

And it got me from being sent to Vietnam on Christmas, because I had built myself up so well that they shipped me back to Nam! [Laughs]

DC: Uh-oh! Yeah.

BC: Because I refused to have them operate on me, and then I built my body up so well that they were like, “Oh, you’re well enough to be killed again.” So, they shipped me back over

there. But then, all of that education that I got with the general and with the ambassador, I put it to work in Vietnam on figuring out how bureaucracies work. And so, when the bureaucracy, I noticed, only knew me when I told them that I was there, I didn't tell them I was there until they knew I was there. [Laughs] You know what I'm saying?

DC: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

BC: Because they put you on shit duty until then [laughs]—

DC: Right.

BC: Until your records came. I was like, "Oh, I'll just—I'll be at the end of the line."

DC: Lay low.

BC: And I'll wait until they say Ben Caldwell, and then otherwise I'll just get to know this base and get to know the people that are on this base. So, I got to meet a lot of the hip musicians that were on the base. And then, when Bob Hope came, I'd go to his setup and, you know, I just started going to those kinds of things until my records came. And then, once my records came, then they shipped me back to my unit.

And my unit—they were crazy. They had made them worried every day that ten thousand NVAs were about to kill their ass. And that was what—that was how I left. I left under that stress, and then came back three months later, and they were *super* stressed out by lack of sleep and just really weren't thinking right, you know.

And then, the Tet offensive happened at around the same time, so I was there for the Tet. And then, we did something that was a little revolutionary in that case, because we had noticed that there was an old man there. And so, we pulled him in. And when we pulled him in, we were talking, "Okay, now, we can just pull out, because now you can drop napalm on the village," you know, because there's just this one guy. And then, when he heard that, he jumped out of our

APC and then ran. And they told us to kill him, you know. And then, I aimed at his legs and missed him. And then, he came back and brought his whole family.

DC: Oh, yeah.

BC: And then, the whole village walked out with us. And then, they said, “Okay, we’ll call it off.” [Laughs] It was like educational. We were so happy that we did that, because we ended up pulling almost a hundred and fifty people out

DC: Out of there.

BC: Out of there, behind [34:26].

DC: Wow.

BC: [Clears throat] So, those were interesting things, you know, in the sense of kids learning, you know, and that. So, and then, I stopped engaging the war. I had figured out that war only works if you do something, you know, so I started figuring out how to be a pacifist in a war zone, you know. And I just refused to kill, just for—you know, I would do it if something was for saving me, but under that whole thing. And that was really educational for me, because it was the first time I could see that, [0:35:00] you know, that you really always have a choice.

DC: Um-hmm. Was that personal, or did that also involve telling people that that’s the stance that you were taking?

BC: It was just—uh-uh, I just did it, because it was survival, you know. I was surviving in the way that I saw fit, that would make Ben feel alright after all this. And that was kind of all I was thinking. I didn’t want to have any kind of gratuitous ideas in my brain about something that I did in a fit of anger and lack of focus, you know.

DC: Did you see it go another way for others?

BC: Oh, yeah. It was easy to do that way, because you're just so pissed off and you make the other "the other," as opposed to—and so, I really learned a lot by that. And so, when I came out of the military, I started just studying people and working. And I did this series of work, of just of my family, and also being truthful with myself with what I saw, because I didn't see in black, I didn't see in grays and other colors. I wanted to bring in brilliance and color and swaths of paint, and even stronger than what was on—in the camera. So, I added to that, you know, so I used an additive paint to all my work. And I also focused on the whole idea of the black body, you know, specifically a woman's body, but mostly black bodies, and dealt with the gradations of those in the desert.

And that made it possible—well, I sent that series to join—for my masters degree at UCLA, and they loved it. And so, I got a full ride, and then I got to hang out with these guys.

DC: So, before that, you went to Arizona State? Is that right?

BC: Yeah. Arizona State was an interesting trip for me because—I first went to PCC, Phoenix College. And then Phoenix College—I was a jock. I first played, and so, I wanted to prove to myself that I could be a fullback and make it, because I was dreaming about it when I was in the military. So, I came back and dealt with it. But I also was a different kid, because I saw inferiority, and they would try to make me less than who I am. In football, it's really rampant, you know. So, I didn't do well with being called, "Boy, jump on this," and "Boy, run up there." And so, I was like, you know, "I don't want to drop this ball, so I'm not going to—just before I pick it up, you kick it and then tell me to jump on it and to bring it back to you, and then call me 'boy' in the same process. I'm just—I don't want to be in football that bad!" [Laughs] You know?

So, I made it through, you know, “Oh, you think you’re a badass! You think you can’t be treated like everybody else,” and all this stuff. And I’m like, “I’m not trying to say—just treat me like I need to be treated. Just say, ‘Hi Ben.’ You don’t have to add anything else to it, you know. You don’t have to add—” [laughs].

DC: Right, right.

BC: And as long as you do that, I’m cool with you. But any of these added—[laughs] that you add to it, it doesn’t work for me. And so, we would get into it like that. But I made the team, and then I was kind of—they kind of like that bite in you, as a football player. And then, I went into Arizona State, and so I got accepted into that. And then, I got out of it, because I knew I had bad knees and I thought that I would be a crippled older person.

DC: Right.

BC: [Laughs] You know?

DC: You’re probably right.

BC: So, it was like, do I want to be a crippled older person for my pride of manhood? Or do I want to go into something that I really like? So, I went into economics, and I didn’t like that because it wasn’t real. Because I started asking questions about the Depression, and then I was saying, “These numbers that we’re studying here didn’t predict the Depression, but you’re still using that as a mainframe for studying depressions. So, what does that mean?”

DC: Right.

BC: You know, it’s really very confusing to me! He says, “Well, there’s a—economics has its own [39:07], and life has its own.” Then, “Why in the fuck am I doing this?” [Laughs] You know? Because I’m not studying anything to do with reality, so it didn’t make any sense to me. So, I then went back to—I focused on still photography. And then, I also took something

that was very—a very unusual class that Arizona State had, and it was “Revolutionary Philosophy.”

DC: Oh, right on.

BC: So, I like philosophy, and we had a Russian revolutionary kind of—what are those agents from Russia, the undercover, like the CIA?

DC: The KGB?

BC: Yeah. Well, they had a KGB guy teaching that class because he was a—he had defected from the Communist Party, and he was teaching this class at Arizona State. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] At Arizona?

BC: And I was like—I thought—I found that out, and then he ended up [0:40:00] being my buddy. So, we would talk about all the different revolutions. The one thing I saw in that, that kind of has super-impressed me even more as I’ve gotten older, is the artist in all of those revolutions was able to make it through every step of the revolution.

DC: Hmm, um-hmm.

BC: Because they were dealing with art and not politics.

DC: Um-hmm.

BC: And so, that’s something that I would just like—just last week, I was in Chicago and I said that, you know, “I’m not political. I’m an artist.” You know? I says, “Because I want—the thing that I’ve found as I’m getting older is that politicians stop people from communicating with other people that are other than themselves.” So, if you’re Muslim, I mean, if you’re Republican, then you don’t talk to a Democrat.

DC: Right, right.

BC: If you're Muslim, then you don't talk to a Christian. But as an artist, I can culturally work with whoever. And I found that out even more so when I taught at Cal Arts more recently, because I even had Nazis in my class from Germany, you know, who believe in real fascism. But as an artist, we can communicate, because it's about an art form that is within that milieu that I don't necessarily like or understand, but we can discuss things in an artistic manner. And just like Leni Riefenstahl, you know, I liked the hell out of her work, but I don't like what she was pushing, you know, or telling the story of, but, man, did she do a good job! You know. And so, that's the kind of thing that we, as artists, have a thing that's outside that thing.

And so, so that's really on a philosophical, political thing, Ben Caldwell as a 65-year-old, that's the thing that I've discovered. And having a business and done business, like in Cuba, done business in places that are hot spots, I've found that when I go there as an artist, that I don't have to worry about people and the politics. Because even when we were going to Cuba, you know, we were going to People to People exchange, and I went there spiritually with the yoga teachers, you know, and we dealt with it like that. And even with them, it's an interesting way to enter a society, as a spiritual person, you know, because you get to see things in a way that other people don't. So, I got to go to Ghana and to Cuba in that manner, and it was really a hell of a good way to go. And I did it as documentary, so.

DC: Um-hmm. And at the end of the day, I mean—

JB: [42:46]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: I was just going to ask you if, you know, at the end of the day, is it still a political act, whether you want it to be or not?

BC: Well—

DC: Because of the way other people use it.

BC: Well, it's interesting. I just know that your alignment with the politicians when you're, even with how I'm having to run my business here, if the councilmen run, it doesn't matter who the guy is or the woman is who's the politician at the time, they're only going to be here four to eight years. I'm going to have to be here forever, so if I align with these different alignments—what I do is have them both in the house, have all of them, you know, be a media person, just like television, just have everybody have their forum.

When the police attacked, after that, we did several events with people who rented the place who did antipolice things. And the police found out about it, and they were like, "I thought we had an understanding." I was like, "The understanding is what? I'm going to still rent this place to people who want—whoever wants to say something. If it's a Nazi, they can rent it. I don't care, as long as they're not putting down people or wanting to kill them. I'm just wanting to have everybody say their piece, just like TV does."

JB: What was the police attack that you alluded to?

BC: This is it right here. I'll show you. [Pause]

JB: Can I get a tape? Can you give me a copy of that file, so I can concentrate on you and know I have that for cutaways?

BC: Yeah, I have it as a Quicktime file, if that's what you mean.

JB: That will be perfect.

BC: Okay. So, this is a documentary done with one of my students. She did it on the whole idea of what we're doing here.

DC: And "here" is where?

BC: Ah, this is KAOS Network. And I named this place KAOS Network out of the whole idea of computers, [sound from documentary begins in background: Reporter, “Last Thursday night ...”] because they use—computer math is chaos math theory.

[Sound from documentary 0:44:50-0:45:21]

Reporter, continuing: ... riot here at the KAOS Network Multimedia classrooms in the Crenshaw District’s Leimert Park.

Police officer: Vice officers had received earlier several citizen complaints regarding an illegal nightclub operating at the location. [0:45:00] [Sound of sirens]

Reporter: But video of the incident shot by one of the project’s students showed riot police in place *before* students emerged onto the street.

[Student]They were trying to force or play the kids into doing something. They were trying to play them into reacting. [Sound of police dispatcher]

BC: So, as it said, you know, they attacked a media classroom. [Laughs] You know, it just—and what happens with my classes is—I started when I first came back to Los Angeles, because I left going on film tours with my films, and then I taught at Howard for three years, and so, I came back with that kind of an understanding. And then, I wrote a grant to be an artist in the community and I happened to be one of the first video artists to get it in the state. Because of my little master’s degree and my past Howard experience, they were able to make it where I could teach and work with the community.

And so, I put this package together where it was like what Shirley Clark had taught us about using media in a real democracy way, so we let the kids play with the cameras, handle the cameras, the power, so they could see that they could be a part of it. So, and then, I’d have them shoot us, and then, we’d shoot them, and then, just get them relaxed around the whole medium.

So, that was what my workshops were, is just really get close to this medium. You can handle it, see your face on a big screen, all of that.

And Shirley believed that the camera and the television was like a dancer's fourth wall, you know, where they can—because when you watch yourself on television, then you kind of adjust your posture and you watch your diction and there's a whole thing that happens when you know that you're being documented, and you see it at the same time. It kind of—it causes you to tweak yourself, you know. And so, I use that as a tweaking, as opposed to me telling them, you know, "You're slouching down." They know what it looks like, so they look at themselves, and they pose for it, you know, just give the camera its due, and that helps them with their sense of posture, who they are as an adult and growing into an adult, and all those things. So, [snapping fingers] I would pop through a lot of kids just that way, is just like pop them on the screen, have them say who they are, what you're about, do it with authority, and I would go through whole classes like that, you know, just like—and that was when cameras and television and all that wasn't in their environment. So, I used that as the first step of trying to emancipate the—

DC: And this is when, when you started? And if you could also tell me just a little bit about what age group you're working with, but also what part of Los Angeles we're in.

BC: Yeah, I was in Watts. So, when I first came in, I was in Watts Towers and I was working with a phenomenal man by the name of John Outterbridge. And John is a phenomenal artist and kind of cultural activator that makes good things happen in this town. He's really, really fantastic. He's from Chicago, musician, artist, sculptor, a lot of things. He reprocesses junk and metal into making them like animate objects that almost seem like they walk and move.

DC: That's Outterbridge?

BC: Yeah, John Outterbridge. Yeah, if you guys aren't tapping him, you should definitely do something with him, because he ran the Communicative Arts Academy, which was the first media organization arts fusion. The thing that was unique to me about the L.A. artist movement here is that it was all fused together. It wasn't just theater, or just film, or just photography. The musicians, the poets, the painters—all of us were friends with each other and got to talk across artistic borders. You know, so it was a kind of a holistic look that was happening here, including how it manifested itself with organizations like The Gathering and Dr. Ligon that had Black Gnostic classes on teaching secret thoughts and processes about Egypt, and just all these different kinds of things were happening, concurrent, together in this place, you know, even when I first came.

And these were the seventies when I first came, so in '71 when I first came to Los Angeles, they had places called [49:44] that was a collective of all the artists doing hair, braiding, leather, just creating all different types of things with an African mood, you know, African feel to it. And they were 20-somethings, you know, all of us were around our 20s, doing this. [0:50:00] And then, they also had drum classes with master drum teachers from Nigeria that were teaching drum and dance classes. They had coops for food, growing environments, also collective living environments, where they all lived with, you know, like the hippie movement type thing, the Gathering.

All of that was taking place here when I came here, and this neighborhood had all the top performers. You know, so like you could have the Miracles, the Temptations, Richard Pryor, the rhythm and blues performers. This place was just reeking with that type of stuff. And that's the L.A. that I came here for. I came here, and this is the neighborhood that had it in here, and that's part of the reason that I gravitated in here, because at first when I moved to Los Angeles, I lived

close to the school. So, I lived at Westwood first, and then I lived in Santa Monica. And when I was editing my films at night, I would drive up the freeway and get off on Crenshaw and drive up and down this street. Because, again, I'm from New Mexico, so just the smell of barbecue and these big beautiful-butt women and just the brown skins and just the smiles, just the whole thing that I wasn't used to, but to see it when I would come here was just really a blessing. So, while I was editing my film, I would always come here, and go to Santa Monica and then come here.

DC: You were drawn here?

BC: Drawn very much here. I like this place. And my aunt lived around the corner, so they introduced me to the place, too. But I thought I wasn't going to be able to conquer the California, you know, the freeway system, so I got as close to the school as possible.

DC: Right.

BC: And I also liked the air in Santa Monica and Westwood, because at that time the air down here was even [52:01]. In Santa Monica, my eyes didn't water and, you know, in Westwood and those places, because I would—my eyes being from Arizona and New Mexico, I was not used to this kind of smog that I was here. So, I also stayed there. But even there, I found out a lot about the history, because just being in my ethnographic brain, I always ask about where, what, and whys of a place. And then, also, being a Scout in New Mexico, we would go all the way to the Indian times. So, I would always want to know, "Where were the Indians living here? And what was that like in this area?"

And then, I remember even, you know, because I was in the military, I liked reading maps, so the whole thing. I was trying to get the L.A. River, you know, I was like, [laughing] "How cool! I'll be able to kill a lot of time hanging around the rivers over here!"

DC: Yeah, right.

BC: I would, like, drive across them and didn't even know I had passed it. [Laughter]

DC: Yeah.

DC: So, that was kind of interesting, too, but it still made me map the area. It made me look at it in another way. And then, some of my earlier times with the projects of the community arts programs, we worked with the Humanitas Project, and that was one of our kind of, I guess, semi-political projects, where we as artists filmed—media artists worked with teachers. And we worked with the teachers from seven o'clock in the morning till their twelve o'clock class, and then we would have history, art, what else? History, art, and not science—we wanted to integrate science. But we had about four different classes that would all collaborate and then we would go out and go and look at the Native culture. And then, we looked at the Spanish culture and found the old haciendas and where they were. And then, dealt with the map of Los Angeles in the earlier days and then the people and do it all the way up until it became Westernized. And then, looked at the airport systems, and stuff like that, that were in and around Los Angeles. I really dug that kind of way of teaching. And so, we would help them then present it in a video way, and then the kids got to learn a lot about the Native culture and all of those cross sectors.

DC: What sort of cross currents do you see with that kind of work and then what you were describing about what you found in sort of the early, sort of the black movement in Los Angeles tapping into African history and culture and sort of finding who you are in the world?

BC: Well, the thing that was unique about California is that once you do that kind of research, it freaks you out, because this was a black col—it was colonized by black Hispanics, you know. And so, that was like, “How come people don't bring that out?” You know? And then, you find out that Aloe Vera Street is called “Calle de Los Negros,” you know, and so the “Street of the Blacks.” And so, when did that name change? It was 1932, [0:55:00] so it was the

same time that this place was built, you know. So, there's a kind of an interesting history thing that happens here, because actually California's history almost started in the early thirties, to me, you know, because they were switching up.

DC: Yeah.

BC: I used to co-teach a class with Norman Cline, and he calls California the "history of forgetting."

DC: Yeah. I was just going to say, because there's just so much covering up or saying that here is no history when there obviously—

BC: When there's a lot of deep history.

DC: Yeah.

BC: So, that was what was unique. And so, that ended up being my manner of discussing, because my family are black Hispanics. You know, we're from that kind of stuff. So, we're mestizos. We're all of what that is about. And so, to me, I wanted to—I saw a lot of similarities there. I saw us there, you know. So, that was what I was digging about the history. And then, I thought that that should be brought out more.

And then, that kind of even—let's see, so that led to, in '84, I also did another project called Electronic Café. And Electronic Café was a part of the Olympics, and we connected five district communities using what later became the internet, you know. And so, that was part of how I started working that way, too, so the same idea of melding cultures. And then, the same thing was happening with me in this politics and non-politics thing, so I found even more then that it's important to do art. Because the more you do—you divide, so if you have the Latino culture cooking with the white culture cooking with the black culture cooking with the Asian

culture, and then you talk politics, that—it's like [makes explosive sound]. You talk religion, it explodes, too.

But you talk about—I might—so I'll bring in a kora player and then talk about the confluent culture between the kora and flamenco, because they're right across, and I was saying, "I know there must be some kind of cultural connection because they're just across the ocean, the sea, from each other, so there has to be some kind of confluence." And then, lo and behold, when we're discussing it and working it out with this teleconferencing connection, it comes off that the Mandinka has a flamenco group, you know, because the kora is a natural thing of a guitar, and then the kind of stomping and the movements are all culturally blended. So, it's just pretty obvious that those things happen.

So, that was what I started trying to do, is to find the confluence of each culture, because as African culture, you'll find a confluence in every culture, because we're the foundation of cultures. You know, we're the old people. So, those old people have infiltrated all the various parts of the other cultures. And so, that's the way that I started dealing with it. So, in some ways, it's like—even when we're doing projects with China, we find out that there's Africa in China. And then, the whole Chinese Museum will tell you, you know, that, in fact, these things are happening, that there is Egyptian influence from the ancient days of those times.

And so, each of these things happen, and then, that helps both sides, because we then get to see this migration pattern that we talked about [58:23] leaving and all these types of migration patterns, but we play like it doesn't happen when we talk in real life. And so, that's what I found my job is to do, is re-remind people that, you know, Kalifa, which was a black Amazon that infatuated a group of guys that were black Moors who were Spaniards who came here—[laughs] you know what I'm saying?

DC: Yeah, yeah. I'm smiling because, you know, in my field in history, you know, sort of the hot thing right now is global history. And I would sort of come back with, [laughs] "What else is there?" Right?

BC: Yeah! So, it's just like you're able to kind of like connect those things. And even with me, I looked up—I had the *Book of Beginnings*. I looked at the *Book of Beginnings* and I looked at my hometown in New Mexico, right? I look up the numerous Indians. Who were their major influences? The Phoenicians! They have Phoenician language. I'm just like, "Damn, man!" You know? [Laughs] What is this? You know, that doesn't even get brought up in my history when I was studying as a kid, you know. But that was, in fact, something that the *Book of Beginnings*, and I was like, wow.

So then, and then when I—then I read about Hannibal being a part of the Phoenicians. And then, you look into the wars that the Italians had with them, and them attacking Carthage and wanting to kill the place, because those folks found ways to pay them back quicker than they wanted to. And they were saying, "How in the fuck are they able to do it?" You know? I bet you they went to the Americas to get their gold and their payback money. You know, they went to the Aztecs and stuff, and came back [1:00:00] and said, "Here's your shit! What?" [Laughs] You know?

DC: [Laughs] Right.

BC: You know? And that was what was coming to me in the sense of their saying, "Well, we've got to stop them from—" and then the Romans said, "We've got to stop them from getting the ocean, because they're powerful in the ocean, and that's what makes their strength. Because even when we whip them, they still are in the ocean." So, they stopped them from doing their

ocean travel and then stopped them from coming back to their home, because they disengaged that whole place, you know.

So, it's that kind of stuff that I think that needs to be kind of mentioned as a part of our history, and it would make young black kids feel a little better, because we're included in the history. You know, it isn't just like a sub-note—because that was my frustration as a kid, is like I would get real fascinated about seeing Caesar, but then, my ass was getting whipped. You know, that's not helping me, because I can't dream! You know, it's always dream within a slave mentality, you know. The Greeks—oh, you're just the painter that's getting your ass whipped—then, there, too. In Egypt, even in Africa land, the Nubians got their asses whipped by the guys who came from the North, you know. So, they're—just every way that you try to find yourself in history being powerful gets stomped on.

DC: Right. And so, you saw a way of putting media tools in the hands of these kids as a way for them to sort of shape where they are?

BC: Yeah! To start at least finding out the definition, as I'm finding it out, too, so we could use this strong, strong medium as a way to empower yourself and to engage and to redefine and like—the word that we're using now, rebrand black! [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Um-hmm.

BC: You know, so you kind of offer that up.

JP: Let's pause for a second.

DC: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

BC: What I'm doing now?

DC: Let me ask you—I think what I'll do—

JB: We're back.

DC: Okay. Could I just ask you to just, you know, give us the quick story of KAOS Network?

BC: Okay.

DC: You know, what was behind it when you got started, we've talked a little bit about, I think. But what are the kinds of things that happened here that you've been able to do?

BC: Okay. So, yeah, I started KAOS Network. Then, it was Video 33, and then, we morphed into KAOS Network. I named it 333 because I thought, again, it was kind of the chaos numbers. You know, it was the pyramid numbers and all that stuff I was playing around with.

And so, but I initially really just started this place because I wanted to fund myself outside of Hollywood. You know, I wanted to figure out how I could live as a media person like a lawyer does without having to be at Cedars-Sinai, you know—how not a lawyer, but a doctor—but a lawyer having to do law for the state or something. You know, they could do their own private business. So, I said I'm going emulate that concept and just put my card in the door and say I'm open for business.

So, who am I going to work for? And I said I'm going to work for what I now call the poor and the vulnerable and use the medium as a way to build strength with them, because they don't have anybody to advocate for them in this neighborhood. So, I'm going to act as an advocate for the poor and the vulnerable with this medium. So, I started working with all the nonprofits. So, I says I'll offer up my skill that I normally would be, you know, work at Columbia Pictures. I want to come here and work in the community with that. And so, that was how I started really.

And then, they paid me to work 20 hours for myself. And so, me and Charles Burnett, who's a fellow filmmaker, we started working on a script and wanted to make it—I did research in finding that kids from 11 to 25, young people, were treated the most outside the culture. They were treated—they weren't understood a lot by the society. And so, I thought that that would be an interesting focus for me, because it also is where new culture grows from, new dance movements, the new feelings and everything. So, I said, "This might be an interesting place, because I could do ethnographic work and then also use that, like Zora Neale Hurston, use it as notes of a culture." And then we can build scripts out of it for dramatic sense, because then it can be real, as opposed to—so, I said, "Okay, let me find out what the kids are. Who are they?" You know?

So, I put them up and said, "What's this hip-hop, hippity-hop stuff that you're talking about? What is that about?" And they would break down the words, you know, "fresh" means this and, you know, "jamming" means something else, and "breakdancing," and all these—they just broke out the whole language.

DC: This is when that's all breaking?

BC: Huh?

DC: Yeah, that's all breaking right at this time that you're working?

BC: Yeah. That film was called—I first called it *The Nubian*, but the people weren't understanding it, so we ended up calling it *I-Fresh*. And so, and I blended it with the idea of the [1:05:00] Rasta movement, so that was how I was really starting to look at things. So, when I was in D.C., I started looking at the youth movements, because the thing that I was starting to notice with my study of the blues was it was the young kids that created the blues. It was the young kids who created jazz. They were young and they grew old in it, you know.

And so, I was like, “Wow! That’s interesting,” and it’s almost generational, so each of them—but it’s the same story but told with different tools, you know, the tools of the time period. And so, I saw that revo—you know, followed it all the way to them being cut off of the instruments and then saying, “Okay, now we’re going to research the past by remixing the old—all of what was there.” So, I saw it as remixing and a historical study, as opposed to what a lot of the guys were telling me, that, “Oh, these damn kids are just stealing music, and they don’t have no music sense,” and all that. But what did you expect if you cut the music out of their world?

DC: Right, right.

BC: And so, so the most logical things is, is that we have an archive of the best music that ever happened in the world that’s in these records here, and so, they started going through it and doing the great jobs that they were doing. And so, that was how I would—

DC: And it’s really homage and it’s historical research and it’s all of that. It’s really interesting. I just think of like, you know, James Brown, like “Funky Drummer” just gets used over and over again, right?

BC: Yeah, and I would even ask some of the kids at first—you know, that was how I would deal with them. I was like, “Man, you guys think you’re doing that with the [1:06:31]? Listen to this live beat by James Brown. What?!” [Laughs] You know?

DC: [Laughs] Right.

BC: You know, listen to these different guys that have created music. And they kind of—at first they would push back from it, and then, eventually they would soak it up. I remember—the place for me that I learned that it was a totally different world was when I loaned them my album. I loaned them one of my albums, and they started scratching the shit. And I almost hit the kid! [Laughter] You know, I was like, “You’re doing *what!*” And I’m like—”Well, I’m going to

give it back to you,” and I’m like, “Hell, no, man! I’m going to have to buy another album. I just don’t understand you guys. You’re tripping.” You know, “Why are you scratching my album up, man?” You know, so we got in it like that. But then, again, I started understanding it and actually integrated it in my work. I made glitches my scratches. I started going toward those as a kind of way of starting dealing with my ideas.

So, the last film that I put together at UCLA for me to go out in the world with—well, actually there were two films, because I went to ethnographic film studies. So, my film in that in 1980 I did a thing called *Babylon Is Falling: A Visual Ritual for Peace*. And what I did with that is I chronicled the interconnection of the African continent with the New World continent with the Old World to kind of show the triangular slave trade, but then to show how people within the triangular slave trade always fought back. It wasn’t just roll over and beat them up type of thing. It was a constant push and pushback, a push and pushback. I just wanted to show that as a part of my thesis of showing it in that way.

And the other piece that I did at around the same time was a film. So, that *Babylon Is Falling* was multimedia. It was using every form that you could get, from magazines to slides to whatever. Anything that had a picture, I would use it, you know, and use it to tell my story. And then, the other one before that was called *The Nubian*, and *The Nubian* was going to be a precursor to this *I-Fresh*. And it’s basically—the whole idea was—a part of what my ethnographic study was, was African religion. And so, I would go to Bimbés and all of those, and so I always infuse the idea of spirituality in every of these pieces that I did, which I should probably name the films, huh? I’ve done—my first film was *Medea*, and *Medea*, that was done in ’71, and it was—didn’t have anything to do with Tyler Perry. [Laughs]

DC: Right.

BC: But it dealt with the iconography of a Mother-God figure, and so I showed her up against the desert, so it was just following my line of doing these nudes in the desert as an Arizona person. So, I did the same thing, but I integrated animation, which was also a part of my past, too. So, and what I did was—the teacher who I worked with at that time was a person that worked with the Smothers Brothers, and he did [1:10:00] Dan McLaughlin and he did the “History of Western Art in Two Minutes,” you know, like, did it real fast. And I was impressed by that and said, “What if I did the history of African people in like three or four minutes, too, and make that all the information that goes inside this Mother-figure, and then have her give birth. And, at the end of that birth, I say, “A culture provides identity, purpose, and direction. If you know who you are, then you know what your purpose is.”

So, it was just that kind of simple poetic—and then, I had then—LeRoi Jones, LeRoi Jones’ poem over it, and it was showing all of our history and a chant-poem saying “Raise the dead. Raise the dead, niggers. Raise the dead. Raise the dead, niggers. Raise the dead. Raise the dead niggers. Raise the race. Raise the race. Raise the race. Raise the race. For this time and this race. This time for the next race,” that kind of hook in it. So, I used that as a kind of a constant chant, with a [inhales and exhales] breathing all through it, and then, kind of a heartbeat of a baby all through it, too.

DC: Wow.

BC: And then, it built up to a kind of crescendo of [makes grating noise] like that. So, it was fun to do as a—because as a film kid raised in that, that was what I always wanted was something visual. [Laughs]

DC: Yeah.

BC: Not talking heads, you know.

DC: Yeah.

BC: And then, the next piece I did was called *I and I*, and it dealt with my military life, is that I saw it was the first time that you could kill somebody when you made them the “other,” you know. So, that was the whole idea of *I and I*, is that we’re all the same people on this earth. And that things have gotten astray by the devil or whoever that makes it where it’s “you and I,” and from that point on, there’s been trouble in the world and the world has gone astray. So, that’s my subtext to start this story and the journey.

And what I was doing at that time was I wanted to fuse—I was really interested in changing the rhythm patterns of films, because to me films needed to be infused with what has been called “soul” in music, you know, whatever that is that divides our music, that makes it—that uniqueness that Michael has Michael. Nobody can do Michael. You know, Stevie Wonder is Stevie. Nobody can do Stevie, you know. And John Coltrane is John Coltrane. Nobody can touch the soul that he is able to touch. And then, Mr. Bird, who then thought of centrifugal breathing as a methodology to have his own space. [Laughs] You know?

DC: Right, right.

BC: All those kind of unique ways of dealing with your art, I think, was what I liked about our people. And when you know you’re getting stomped and you say, “Okay, follow me down this road, you know. Never come up for air.” Okay? Where is your air going to come from? You know? [Laughs]

DC: Wow.

BC: And so, I think that that kind of stuff is really interesting to me, to see what happens with humans when they get trapped, you know. And that was [what] I felt like when Nam—

getting trapped like that. And so, I felt it—what would that have been like, 500 years of that, you know, and then, how do cultures deal with that?

And so, it was fun kind of etching that kind of stuff out, so it made me look at different place. And so, hip-hop was an amalgamation of all of that. For instance, even the breakdancing, for instance. Breakdancing was capoeira, right? And so, capoeira was a coded dance that was a viciously strong martial art, you know. And that got us our freedom in Brazil. You know, there wouldn't have been any maroon societies, there wouldn't have been a lot of the—there wouldn't have been the Rastas without it, you know, because they were able to whip ass and go up on the hills and protect themselves with this magic fighting system, you know. And so, I think—and when I read about that, it was like there's that soul fighting.

DC: Sure.

BC: Because these cats would watch a horse and watch him get—there's a certain point when they're—all four legs are off the ground. Grab one leg, pull it from under him, have razors on their legs, cut the riders [1:14:34], and then disappear behind a bush, all in one fell swoop. That's cowboy and [laughs] everything else mixed together, you know, because it—and so, that kind of fascinated me in the studying of this stuff as we're going through it, because this is stories you don't get to see. But imagine if we were able to embody that in movies. So, that was what I started thinking.

So, Charles and I started writing. And so, the *I-Fresh*, *The Nubian*, [1:15:00] was really about young people who have that ancient spirit in them, and how this gets activated. And they're being activated periodically throughout the movie, you know, and sometimes they don't know it, you know. And so, that's what it was about, the first level of the movie, so I was going

to make the first movie like that, and the next movie where it becomes even more like a superhero, but to make it go toward a superhero in time, not the first episode.

So, that's my next life, is to work on this whole series, from *The Nubian* out, to show it in different places. Like, I want to show how some of my life in Southwest, so when the person travels there, they can meet the Geronimo and intersperse with the thought processes of the real Indians there and how they feel about their life, you know, between that Texas and Oklahoma kind of gathering of folks, you know.

DC: Right.

BC: And so, each of—you know, you go to the South. We can then kind of embody the spirits of the people that were there in New Orleans and the voodoo and some of the—like, my mom was raised in Texas, and they still practice a little bit of that stuff and believe it in that environment. And so, that's the other part is the whole migration west, you know, that hasn't really gotten looked at, too. So, all those stories are what I'm wanting to tell, that Western Migration, because we've had the Northern Migration from the South, but no one really has charted *our* story, you know, and told it in a way that makes it insightful and understanding. So, that's one of the things that I plan on doing.

DC: Do you feel like in your storytelling, too, you're—I'm just curious how you're responding to some of the, like the blaxploitation films, or some of the more mainstream treatments of this kind of fighting-back kind of character that you're describing, and were you playing with that?

BC: Yeah, I didn't ever like those guys.

DC: Yeah. [Laughs]

BC: [Laughs] No, as a matter of fact, when our films get shown in Europe, they feel proud at us. They say, “You guys are the—this is like jazz.” And that was the best thing I ever heard, because they were saying that we were following the tradition of jazz and not kind of—not of Amos and Andy. And, to me, most of the work is Amos and Andy, you know. And so, yeah, no, I never—see, it’s according to what you call blaxploitation. So, that was what the thought to me was, is like some are telling the true story, like *Super Fly* was a true story. It was written by a black man, directed by black men. *Shaft* was a superhero concept. All the copies are the blaxploitation, to me.

DC: Are they? Yeah, okay.

BC: And it’s the same thing with Mr., you know, *Sweet Sweetback*. You know, that was a true—it had sex, it had craziness and all, but then to make those, then, icons that represent us forever, no, that’s not us, you know. And so, that’s the problem, I think. That’s what I call blaxploitation. Jamaa Fanaka, he did the *Penitentiary* series. I helped him do those things. I don’t consider those blaxploitation. It was a black man’s rendition of what he saw in that world. But anybody else who emulates that and writes that as supposed to be our story, then, it becomes a [1:18:33]. You know, that reeks exploitation to me, because they’re exploiting something that they caused in the first place, you know—

DC: Sure, right.

BC: And I’m not saying “they,” the artists themselves, but that the society as a whole has caused to a certain group of people to have to be in shit, and then you see them in shit, and then they make the story about them in shit, and then they tell it in a way that humanizes the whole process in ways, because they found jazz and blues there, and they found something that—you know, they were able to make flowers out of the compost, you know. And I think that’s the

blessing that we've been blessed with. We—and I'm beginning to see that, when I'm doing my most recent study, that it really was planned, you know, by the Egyptians.

DC: Right.

BC: You know, the Egyptians inculcated the power of the music, and they put all of their thousands of years of history and icons in our music. And that's the reason it's extremely powerful, because it's touching on things that we're not even aware of yet, you know. And I started noticing that because it's almost our cosmology, you know. It tells our worldview to its umpteenth degree, you know, and any portion of it is like a hologram about our world—the mathematics, the structure, your cadence, the symbols—all of it is like a hologram, you know, and you can break [1:20:00] it off, and it'll answer all the various questions. If you need science answered, if you need a cosmology answer, all of them are built already into the music.

And I'm finding out more recently that that's how Africans are teaching history, the ones that are enlightened about their culture. They're teaching it in that manner. And the more interesting thing, too, is that they're teaching it, that their migration, the reason that they had these massive migrations is for obvious reasons: Alexander the Great, [laughs] because he wasn't too great for Africa, and Caesar.

DC: Right.

BC: You know, those incursions into Africa caused the great migrations that we're talking about, you know, from those areas of that world. And so, that's the kind of interesting thing—anyway, I get all excited about all this stuff.

JB: Let me stop for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're going again.

DC: Can—?

JB: [ 1:20:51 ] show us some hip-hop stuff.

DC: Well, before we—can we wait? Yeah, before we get there, I just wondered could you take us just back to the moment of UCLA and the cohort that you found there and that community? You alluded to it a little bit, but—

BC: Yeah, well, what we found was it was—first person was Haile Gerima. Haile, we—this is the way this school went. It's like when we first went there, up until the year we started, all the people of color who were going to school there, were considered the other. You were ethnographic. So, everything was ethnographic, with Asians, with Middle Easterners, even—you know, even Yugoslavia and all those kinds of places, they were all considered the other. And so, we all had ethnographic, so there was an ethnographic layer that was still at the school. And so, we came in for the first year to being the first film students to be a part of the regular program. So, they had that kind of an onus on how people treated us, like we were—some of them were treating us like we were the—you know, what is it that they're still fighting about? Us having a privilege because, you know, that we deserve to be there kind of a thing?

DC: Oh, yeah, right.

BC: And, you know, you don't have the money to be in this rich school kind of thing.

DC: Affirmative action stuff, yeah.

BC: And so, it forced us—so, nobody wanted to work with us. So, Haile happened to be the first person to become a TA at that time. And so, we all gathered around Haile and said, “Okay, cool it. If they're going to push us into a corner, then let us all be in the corner together [laughs] and work on some ideas.” And so, we created—so, it made us create—every grant that the students had, we won them. And after we won them, they killed them. You know, they would

stop the [1:22:53] grant. We were getting those at ten and twenty grand. And so, we were just lining up, saying, “Okay, it’s your turn next. So, you go forward.” And by the time we all got, it was our turns, they all started disappearing, you know. And so, we were like, “Damn!” But that’s the camaraderie that we had, and it was about 13 of us and it grew into about 22 of us. And we, over ten years we—and we’re still doing films and stuff, but for the most part, we were able to create, what, 22 features—no, 55 features, shorts and features, you know.

DC: Um-hmm, and where did the name come from, the L.A. Rebellion moniker? From outside?

BC: Yeah, it was put on us by a man who thought that it would be a good idea, [laughter] because it struck the ears right, you know. So, that was where they put it. And I hated the name at first, but I figured—and then, I looked up “rebellion,” and you know what comes up first? “Slave rebellion,” if you Google it, you know. So, I was like, so maybe that’s the way they saw us, as people who—just because we, again, were prideful. We wanted to make our work really represent our people in a real way, and we used music as our main structure to build from that, because music was very free to us. And so, we used our structure of that.

DC: Would you have preferred “revolution” to “rebellion”?

BC: I don’t know. I think, well, what we called ourselves is the L.A. School.

DC: Just straight up?

BC: Yeah. That was what we were being called up until it got called the Rebellion. And so, but “rebellion” means—I think it means that we rebelled against doing blaxploitation films. And so, I think that’s an interesting discussion. And so, that was something that I’m going—they were starting to use that as a mode to discuss that whole era, because at that same time Europe

got to see our work, and here in this country only museums and college elite got to see our work. For the most part, it wasn't shown [1:25:00] in regular theaters.

DC: Right.

BC: And so, it was kind of kicked out of the country, like jazz was, too.

DC: Right.

BC: So—and blues, too. You know, it was not very well-treated by the populace while it was here, but people overseas really saw the beauty of it. Because, I'm telling you, like my film, when I showed it at—they had a retrospective in Paris—the *I and I*—I got a standing ovation because the people said it was a real African film, and why aren't more people doing films that celebrate Africa in a prideful way? Shirley Clark, the thing that she said after she saw my film at the first school screening, she was like, "How long do you think that you can keep the people who built the pyramids down?"

DC: Hmm, um-hmm.

BC: You know? So, it's that kind of a thought process that I think our work brings on. It's just that it shows the prideful, high cultural sense of our culture, you know, and we like to carry it with pride, you know.

DC: Um-hmm. So, now let's move to [laughs] hip-hop and also back, maybe, to the footage you were starting to show of when the police came storming in. We'll pick up back with that.

BC: Okay. Let's see, the hip-hop. I have—the group of guys that I started working with here are called Project Blowed, and I started with them in '84.

DC: Project Blowed?

BC: Yeah, Project Blowed. I started with them—not in '84. I started with them in '92. But in '84 I started with a group called I-Fresh. Let's see. Yeah, I have one that has all the guys on it. [Pause] So, let me just do this one right here. This is where I am right now in history, is we're doing a project that we're calling—using the Sankofa principles. The Sankofa principles is, again, the whole idea of soul. I'm trying to really investigate how the thing that we have to offer up to the world is the struggle that we went through in life, and how we were able to stay healthy and focus culture out of it has a lot to do with our music, it has a lot to do with our idea of having everything have our innate body but also the spiritual body about it is an integral part of African thought process, even as African Americans.

And I always use the example of just the Baptist church. You can see how the black people deal with it and how the western world dealt with it. You know, and that's just one of the most dichotomy—action of just how western—and then, you can say, “Oom-pah-pah-pah,” with a horn, with a saxophone, and then Coltrane, you know, and Bird, how they dealt with that same thing that was in their music and really propelled that horn into another level of like emulating a voice and stuff, you know. So, I think that's what we can offer up as technologists is a kind of a blissful blend of spirit with a technological instrument.

And so, the first thing that we—thought that I had was to repurpose pay phones. And so, in repurposing them, since I was doing this teleconferencing and all those, was like how can we connect people? And then, again, how could it take care of the poor and the vulnerable? So, the first thought is let's put a wifi on the pay phone. And then, if we add wifi, then it has a carcass that we could put a computer in. And so, yeah, that's a part of what we ended up doing, is then, it could be a totem, emulate the ancient totemists.

DC: Wow, yeah.

DC: And then, but then, to repurpose the original piece itself, we started deconstructing them, tearing them apart, putting them back together, seeing how you could add a computer into—the whole thought process.

DC: Right.

BC: So, about five or six weeks ago, we put this project together at the School of Innovation. And I'm really also trying to track teaching—and I really like working in college environments, because you get about 20 heads on an idea, [1:30:00] you can get a lot more done. And I really like that type of process. And I'm really open with cultures, because I think it's fun to see it in a lot of different ways. So, we have Chinese students, people from, what, like Slovenia, and Pakistan, and those areas, along with folks from, you know, various parts of the United States, and then, blacks and whites, South Africans, just a lot of just this blissful blend of 15 masters and PhD students from USC and the School of Innovation.

So, we put this together. [Project audio begins at 1:30:39] And [1:30:44] is like a treasure chest of ideas and concepts. And using the Sankofa principles to reclaim your past by going into the future with pride. And this, the whole rap again, like I was saying, is to do this thing for the poor and the vulnerable, is the envision of open face. And so, the whole idea of it being open and free is really enticing to me, because I think we can kind of—that might be an interesting way for us to kind of occupy the virtual space. And so, that was what I started thinking is the occupation of the virtual space, and when we occupy it with our icons, then that iconography could be the things that we work with in the future smartphone sphere.

DC: Sure.

BC: And so, if we already know what the problems are going to be, and we have ticket takers that are there for the things that are virtual, then we could make sure that gentrification doesn't happen in that sphere, you know, in the virtual sphere.

DC: Yeah.

BC: So, that's what the thought process was with this. And so, how can we do it? How can we engage, and then, to do a class that we can track for ten years? And just resist gentrification and see if we can make a sustainable community. And I use this type of type to show how chaos works, to organize ideas, to get concepts together, and then to set up these social models, to scale up and down, so we can replicate the systems, and then to influence the providers, and then to encourage artists to really be some of the major people that engage it on the growing level. Because if we can engage things when the art is involved, then I think artists can help a whole lot, because most people don't know how to think like artists, you know.

DC: Um-hmm. And you're saying get in on the ground floor right—because all this is coming down the pipeline.

BC: Right.

DC: So be there when it—right at the beginning.

BC: So we can have these as ideas, because I already met with MTA and I told them we have these things, and they're like, "Wow!" So, we can help define what they dream toward, you know, if we've already done the dreaming. So, this is what this workshop was about, is to give all the different people, we get over a phone, and then we use the Steve Jobs methodology of quickly thinking of ideas and user-friendliness of the objects. So, we would do that, saying, "If you plugged it in, what would it do? What would you press? How would you act through it?"

And just go through the whole process and not just think of something, but how would it really work? So, this was the whole planning part of it, and then, the mission, like I said, was attack that monitor, I mean, the pay phone in front of my building here, because it was a private-owned one. It isn't owned by Pac Bell, so we could hack it and get an idea of how to do it. And then, you know, this is to show that this is the first thing that you normally come and see if you come up, and this is what you normally see now.

DC: Right, right.

BC: And so, we bought 14 of them from a shopping center and we got them for 20 dollars each.

DC: Because they were just getting rid of them?

BC: Yeah. And they didn't see what need we'd have. So, we're thinking of doing hyperlocal distribution with it. And so, all the wonderful music and arts that are created and film and video and all the things that are created, we can—you have to come here to get it. So, it forces people to come to a black community to get the needs, kind of like it did in the past if you wanted to go to a black neighborhood, you had, you know, to listen to jazz.

DC: To listen to jazz or whatever.

BC: That was it.

DC: Yeah.

BC: So, we then came up with our logo and our label. We valued it as an integral part. And we used Sankofa and also the Phoenix, which are the same kind of concept of regeneration. [1:35:00] And this is regeneration to Cubans, I mean, to Brazilians, is to have a piranha eat it. And then, here's New York; they made a phone booth into a library. And so, it's just to give people ideas of a lot of different ways that we can attack it. And then—

DC: [Laughs]

BC: An aquarium, you know. [Laughs] I want to see that in France.

DC: That's great.

BC: And this is San Francisco; they tagged it up and added some vibe to it.

DC: Where, yeah, the phone's even gone at that point, yeah.

BC: And then, this is the whole idea of local producing, so this guy made his music where you could only get it at this café. And then, this is the raspberry [1:35:42], that's the computer interface that you can tie a screen to. You can do all kinds of things with it. And, of course, we wanted to show documentaries. And then, CR codes, so we're thinking of coming up with real unusual ones so you could—if a person had it on a t-shirt, you could aim the thing at the person, or you could show it on a magazine and art.

And then, we're mapping the cultural density of this area, so within the five-mile radius of here, there isn't a black person who's famous that didn't live or work around this area. And that's really frightening. I mean, it's like, you know, you can almost just say anybody. You just say it: Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and right up the street Hampton Hawes, Chambers Brothers, it's just on and on and on. And so, we want to bring this out. And then, we have the New Schoolers that I've been working with. So, the New Schoolers we have that have been out of my place, is like—the early ones is the guy who did *Lion King*, he was one of the young kids that we worked with when they were being ostracized and couldn't have a home place, so we provide them with that.

And this was another concept that we were thinking of is the urban treasure hunt, so that makes it where people can go around with their bicycles or walk and test out other places, and then have coupons that they can use as a way for that. And so, this is what I'm saying is, as an

artist, we can think of a lot of just unusual ways for things to happen if we engage the earlier parts of this. So, that was what I'm finding is my new world, is just to let's do these story banks, you know, just like people can come up to it and use Skype, tell stories.

DC: And listen to other stories, other people's stories?

BC: And listen to other stories.

DC: Yeah.

BC: By sending them to your smartphone is what we're thinking.

DC: Yeah.

BC: You know, so you can—

DC: [1:37:36] kind of stuff. It's awesome, yeah.

BC: And so, this is the mapping project that I was telling you. So, we're doing the mapping of the cultural density of the neighborhood so we can show that that's the economic engine for this neighborhood, and that we need to really bring it up, because we can't act like we're surprised that music, our music, is worth money anymore. So, I think we should act like it's worth money. [Laughs]

DC: Um-hmm.

BC: So, that's what I'm doing with this. And I really just broke this out on saying how booths could be used, you know, for triggering videos, DJ music. You know, you drop a quarter in, you can see a local business thing. You can use it as a point on tour for an audio tour, so it can be used [1:38:25] thing so you can go to each one of these places. And so, it's just really good for all these different things. And this is the other part that I started dealing with is just all the different things that it could be used for, [pause while audio plays] which is quite surprising, I mean, you know, how much, how stretched out.

And then, these are some of the kids, just to show cultural impact. I have groups of kids here that are really cutting edge and front music. So, this movement here hasn't been defined yet. It's like a blend of hip-hop and punk music and skater. They call it Wow That's So Indie! and Bananas!

DC: And they perform out of this space?

BC: Uh-huh, they perform here. And then, these are religious—you know, like we had religious hip-hop church here, too, where the men who really wanted to praise God, but wanted to do it with like rapping-style, they would get around in a circle and praise to God like they felt it, you know. And it was kind of interesting. So, for me, you know, cinema screenings, we have these in here.

DC: So, do you feel like you sort of—like, whose space is this? Do you feel like you sort of curate this space or—?

BC: Yeah.

DC: Kind of caretake it?

BC: It's an investigative—[1:40:00] I see it as really a laboratory for testing ideas out and then launching them out to the world.

DC: Yeah, cultural startup. [Laughs]

BC: Yeah. And we've been able to really start up a lot of people in different ways here. And so, it's just really using the idea of four walls and a mind and getting the kids together and being positive. We're able to do almost anything. So, I'm able to do one thing after another, or multiple things concurrent. So, this is our multiple thing concurrent. We came up with an art walk to attack empty buildings. You know, there was a lot of desolation. And so, we looked up stuff and found there was a whole idea of phantom galleries, so we pitched phantom galleries.

And I'm on the [1:40:49], so I talked to the owners and said, "Let us be realty company for you, and we'll put some art up in it."

And so, we were able to get a major, major anchor to come in. It was like the Norton Family Trust were the first people to come through and wanted to get a group of buildings. But we had a little kind of—the neighborhood wasn't quite ready for that much strength yet, but we got to test it out. You know, we got to see that it, in fact, worked. So, we were able to fill nine buildings, change the look of a neighborhood, engage the theater next door to make it where it's—upgraded it, because it was just a desolate old building with homeless people in front of it.

DC: Oh, really? And now, it's—how much money did you say was put into it?

BC: They spent 12 million dollars to just do the facade, you know. And so, that's the kind of thing that I'm seeing. And then, we're also engaging the green world. So, we put together classes on that. And then, to see how artists can do sculptures and design the area and all like that, as artists. So, it's been fun, man! I just—engaging in this, but, you know, all the different ways that you can go, just try it out, see what can happen, and that way you can send out strong, strong youth.

We also go internationally. So, one of the things that I did in '99, I took, went with—Yogi Bajan sent a group of black yoga teachers to go to Cuba. And he sent them to Cuba because that was really the place where all the Africans who were in the New World shook off the Middle Passage and got reprocessed and sent to other places. So, he felt that there is a whole lot of cultural memory there that we could tap by talking to the babalawos. And so, we went and talked to the babalawos there and had them talk about the presence of yoga in their culture. Because Yogi Bajan—

DC: So, who are babalawos?

BC: Huh?

DC: The babalawos?

BC: The babalawos are like priests, priests in the Yoruba culture. And Cuba practices it like no other place, better even than Africa, because what they've done is they've thrown their science in it. So, I got to talk to physicists about tribal markings, and they're not tribal markings. They're really immunizations, you know, like acupuncture immunizations with herb in it. And so, when you see a whole group of people having it, it's just like all of us—

DC: It becomes a tribal marking.

BC: Yeah, we all have our little mark. But they did it where they would isolate and focus with the acupuncture points. And, of course, if you ask some of them do they know what it is, they don't, because it's thousands and thousands of years of history, and they're just following it by rote, you know. So, but under the minds of a physicist, they look at it and they wanted to see specifically what, you know, what's up with this, and so they were able to really study that. So, we were able to talk to them that way.

I found my trips to Cuba really, really, really wonderful, because the society, when it comes to intellectualism and studying of medicines and stories and arts, they've thrown all their money into it. You know, the people may be poor, but their art is very rich and the intellectuals are very enriched, you know, because they can go as far as they want to.

And the other thing that was a blessing with that culture, to me, is that they had an army of healers. They would train healers to go out, to go to places, not Army guys. You know, they didn't ship out their arms only to Africa to fight against apartheid, but for the most part—and even that, 300 thousand soldiers to fight against apartheid! That's how many people they sent. You know? I was really pretty amazed. I was like, “Wow, no wonder they're pissed at them!”

[Laughs] You know? That's like—I didn't have no idea [1:45:00] that they had that many boots on the ground in South Africa, in the Southern African Republic.

So, anyway, so that was our Cuban trip. So, I'll show you this one. This is Los Muñequitos. We got to meet them, and the thing that was fun about them is Los Muñequitos are really from New Orleans. You know, they're a whole group that moved to New Orleans during the time—[long pause in conversation to watch video] So, this is inside here.

Now, this has been a real interesting experience these last 18 years with these guys, because I've watched them go from their 20s to almost 40-something now. So, the whole process of watching hip-hop get older, and then, working with their next generation of kids has been—[long pause to watch video] So, we ended up being the first group from the U.S. that really worked with the Cubans and stayed there with them, and we went there about five times in this kind of People-to-People cultural exchange and—

DC: Were they allowed to come here as well?

BC: Yeah, they ended up coming here but—over a period of time. But once they were here, it's just a different thing. It's different to become an American. What they ran into was once you become an American, then a lot of your things, like your apartment, you have to pay your rent. You have to—utilities are pretty heavy, [laughs] you know, all of the things that they had basically paid for by the state. School you have to pay for, you know, so it was—so, I think the thing that I started seeing is once you kind of X off utilities and rent, and not having to pay a high price for your food, then you're almost talking a lot of your wage. So, if you then make about two to three to four hundred dollars a month, that's—you don't need that much more. So, it kind of equalizes itself. And you don't have to pay for hospital bills at all. If you need [1:50:00] your teeth done, you just get it done, you know. And then, your kids, they can go to

college as long as they can pass the test. They can go all the way to PhD as long as they can do it, you know.

So, the socialism was really kind of interesting. It's, to me, more bureaucratic, because they're really hardcore bureaucrats, you know. So, when we had to shoot there, I had to go through so many levels of communications that it was really—they were trying to shake me off, I think, in the sense of the bureaucracy, and I was more like taking note. I'm like, "Damn!" And I would go in the next place and I would be smiling, and they were like, "Why are you smiling?" And I'm like, "This is fun, you guys! You're sending me through all this shit!" [Laughs] It was like, "I'm learning!" It's like, "Now, what's my next step after this? Who do I have to see?" You know, because I'm excited. I liked your process, because it's like—

DC: Figure out the puzzle.

BC: Yeah! It's like—DJ—we went to a theater, I mean, we went to a nightclub. And we talked to the owner, but they don't own it, because it's owned by the state.

DC: Right, right.

BC: But he said that we could put the DJ in at a certain time, not knowing that the DJ is part of the state, too. [Laughs]

DC: Oh, wow. Yeah, right.

BC: So, we come in and we set up our stuff. And we say, "The owner said we could do it." And the guy is like, "He doesn't have no right to do this," and threw all our shit away and started—you know, we almost got into a fight with him, because we thought—but it was just, you know, when you're in the U.S., you talk to the owner. The owner—who else do you talk to? But there, you have to talk to the state. So, that was a little bit interesting, even for DJs. So, they have everything really organized to the umpteenth degree.

DC: Um-hmm.

JB: [1:51:47]

DC: Go ahead, yeah.

JB: When we were setting up, you were talking about the Rodney King decision and, you know, what it was like being here on the ground. Was it—what was your experience of that moment?

BC: Of Rodney King?

JB: Yeah.

BC: Well, the very first thing that happened was I was—we all couldn't—we thought that it was definitely going to be a guilty verdict and so almost forgot about it. And so, I got off work, and my wife came and got me. And she told me that Rodney King's—the guys who beat him were released. And we were like, "What?!" I just rambled throughout the city, you know. I ran around, and then, we came here to our community. And people were really angry, just really, really, really angry. They were befuddled, just running around, just not knowing almost what to do, but angry, angry, angry.

And I think the icon for me was to see a young white kid get off on the corner here and was apologizing to everybody. And then, people were—didn't care. They used him as—as, you know—he pushed out, and I told him, "Don't go further south!" [Laughs] I said, "Don't go further south, man!" And he got in and went further south, so that was really deep, so I don't know whatever happened to him. But he ended up at the wrong time in history to be in an all-black community. But I think he had the right attitude, because he was like, "I'm sorry, man. Even though it isn't my fault, but I'm sorry. That's the dumbest thing that this country could have ever done." And so, he dealt with it that way. So, that was one of the icons for me.

But then, the next thing was the real paramilitary handling of it, because I just wondered about all the burning. I, in being in the military before, I just know you can't—you know, a building doesn't level in a couple of hours. You know, it doesn't burn down to a rubble in a few hours. I think it would be—like, even myself, if I had to strike a fire inside a store and have it burn down, I wouldn't know how to really do it, you know. It's a hard thing to burn cement and hard floors and then, to make it where it's so combustible that it burns it and burns it hard, you know, all the infrastructure and stuff. I mean, even if you threw gas around, it would just burn mostly the gas, you know. It wouldn't burn the whole building that fast. You know, I just can't see that. So, I was just noticing that as a real thing that was really kind of strange.

It was cathartic. A lot of people, and all the whole cultures—it wasn't just a black thing. It was a lot of people from Central America out here in the streets, [1:55:00] and they were just as pissed off. And they were used to war zones, so they dealt with this pretty easily. Because I remember I was right here, and then I saw a couple of little ladies walking out amidst all of this. And I said, "Señorita, it's not a very good night to be doing this." And she says, "It's alright, it's alright, it's alright." And then, they went down there. And I saw them next, and they had a couple of Smirnoff containers, [laughing] you know, not just the bottles, but just crates on top of their heads, and they were taking this shit out! I was like, "Okay! Go ahead on, y'all!"

So, that was a kind of an indication of how it was just everybody. Everybody was pretty pissed and everybody took advantage of what was happening there. And then, the following days were even worse. People just really—there was anarchy. I had never seen anarchy in full lurch, but it was anarchy. People were throwing things through picture windows along the way and grabbing shit—in broad daylight. It was like just kicking in things, you know, unless someone grabbed them and stopped them, you know. And we would stop them in places where we knew

the people, you know, and stuff like that. But you couldn't do all of it, so it was indiscriminate hitting, sometimes just boys being boys, you know, like with a bat, just hitting shit and stuff like that.

DC: Right. Were you worried about this place?

BC: Uh-huh. I was here guarding it. [Laughs] But people, for the most part, guarded it for me. And then, we had another incident that was real interesting. We had a thing called The Black Gallery that had almost thousands and thousands of sculptures in it, from Africa and from all over the world, and the building next to it was on fire. And so, everybody came from out of the residential neighborhoods and pulled them all out in the street and saved this place. It didn't burn. But then, the following couple of days later, after they helped pull him everything out, and then put everything in, and not one thing was stolen.

DC: No way!

BC: So, it was almost like people were almost like automatons drawn towards saving those things. They just came in and helped him pull out all those things, because the fire looked like it was going to blow out that building. So, things like that happened. The Korean family that was on the corner here, who still is here, they'll pull out—they have a book and they say—they have the whole place burning, and they say, "The black families helped me save my place." So, they're proud to let people know that—all of us did, you know, because I went by there and said, "Stay off these guys. These guys are cool, man." You know, "Just leave them alone," you know.

Whereas the grocery store that went up, two days before that, I saw him just knock somebody in the chest and say, "Get out of here!" You know, that kind of stuff, just really kind of evil stuff, you know. You don't do that to a customer, you know. No matter what kind of customer, [laughs] you know, you don't grab them and hit them and stuff like that. So, the

Koreans have a short wick just like black Americans, and so, it is pretty volatile with the two groups here. And I also had an insight with Koreans that's different than most people because they were my friends in Vietnam, you know, and Koreans are considered the black people of Asia. And so, there was a kind of a—they would say, "Me and you are the same, G.I." You know, they would deal with us in the same kind of cultural way that was really respectful and felt similarity, you know.

DC: Yeah.

BC: So, I was telling all the black people here that they really feel like they're us, so that's part of the reason they migrated to our neighborhoods, because they also took care of us in Korea, because all the Army soldiers, and those guys dated them. And so, they knew us in that way. So, that's the reason that they're here, you know. And they know how to braid your hair because they braided the hair in Korea, [laughs] you know, and they know how to take care of black hair and black bodies and the whole thing, which is kind of unusual. So, they came here with a lot of skills and were able to undercut our market real well, because it was outside money, you know.

DC: Sure.

BC: And so, that's what I'm learning. I don't blame things on folks. I'm more just like learning. So, that was what even the uprising was about for us, was the—for me, the police thing that happened a year later, with the police trying to prove that they are powerful like this.

And, you know, I must not a hundred percent blame it on the police. And this is what we ended up studying with it, because I have this friend, Marcelina Morgan, that ended up doing a study on that time period for me. And [2:00:00] what she found was it was Emmett Till again. It was the same thing that killed Emmett Till. It was *us* that killed him. We whispered. We did this

passive-aggressive attitude about, like, “Did you see him hanging around with that white girl?” And saying it loud enough so the master could hear it. You know, like, “What white girl?” And find out it was the grandfather that was hearing it, and then he tells his son, he says, [mumbling] “You know, [2:00:32] when you’re not around, and he’s up here doing this.” And so, that whisper came up to the point that it ended up killing a kid.

It’s the same thing that happened with us. Cellphones were just coming in, and gangbanging with our kids, and they all had hoods, and all men standing on the corner. And you saw how many of them there were. It’s just like a lot of kids. And so, we emancipated the street, you know. That was what we were trying to do, because in the ’80s they all got fearful of the street, because people were thinking drive-bys. But, again, that was—you know that that’s what happened here, was that it was the CIA agents came here to that theater and said that they caused all of that havoc in our neighborhood. They announced it, saying that it was—because it was a part of the problem. Imagine kids who don’t have sense—like, these cars—like, the burning down of the buildings, one, they don’t have that skill, you know. [Laughs]

DC: Right.

BC: Then, the second thing: Who has exporting and importing capabilities from Central America and bringing in crack here? They don’t have no airplanes. They don’t have any airplane skills. You know, nobody’s bringing it in on the ground. They’re not bringing boats through. How does it get here? It got here through the agents, you know, and they admitted it.

And so, this whole neighborhood, when what we call—and some of the early studies by the guys, from Martin Luther King, all the doctors, they were all saying that this whole gang thing was made up. And I know it’s hard to believe. But the thing that they would say is just this,

is, like, you look at a gang and you look at how internationally organized they are. Black churches aren't that well-organized, and it's the most organized thing we have.

DC: Right.

BC: And then, so how did these kids get all this organizing skills all of a sudden.

DC: Right.

BC: Out of prison? Come on!

DC: Right.

BC: You know? And then, the other thing is a military man is shooting, you know. When they were first killing who they shot at, and both of the people were moving, you can't [2:02:42], I mean, you have to be a super sniper to be moving and hit a moving object, you know, and you almost can't even do it with a machine gun, you know. So, those are little things that came out in my brain. So, I asked the kids, "When they were shooting, did—were they trying to hit him?" And they were like, "Yeah." I'm like, "And they were moving, too?" I'm like, "Wow, that's a little bit deep," because in order to really do that, you have to shoot thousands and thousands and thousands of bullets to be able to be that much of a marksman.

DC: Yeah.

BC: And they don't have that much money. [Clears throat] So, all those things are things that make [me] go, "Hmm." I don't have an answer for it, but it did make me go, "Hmm." I don't know what the answer is, but I know that it's more than just these guys here in this neighborhood.

DC: It raised the question, yeah.

JB: Did you film any of this, as a filmmaker?

BC: Of the uprising? No, I didn't. I was—I at that time viewed it almost like a birth, you know. I really thought it was intruding on people when they were just getting cathartic energy out. And it was a time that, to me, my—I know most of my political friends couldn't understand it, but I'm just not that kind of person. I don't like shooting—because even homelessness, I was asked to do projects on that, and I can't shoot a mother scrambling the last five hours, you know, to get her kids fed and find a place to sleep in a danky-assed downtown in the first place. And so, it just—it doesn't push good buttons in me.

And I don't even work in prisons. I hate working in prisons, because I had a job doing that and I just can't last too long when people are in prison. I can't shoot people like in an animal state of being. And even if it helps them out of it, I can't put myself in that animal state of being to shoot them in that way. It's just—and so, I rather just tell stories about it, because we will use a prison and tell a story about a person in prison. But to shoot a real live person that has to live through that whole degrading experience [2:05:00] and to document them behind bars and stuff, I've never been able to really do that. So, that's my kind of foible. I am not too—so, that's what happened with that.

So, but what I ended up doing about it is I did a—I did do a piece, now that I think about it. I did a piece called "Word, Sound and Power," and I did it for Channel 28. And so, my focus was then to show how powerful art was, you know, so that art places were the only place not attacked, you know, because we have a sense of working with the community. And then, we made poems out of the stories, you know, made music out of it. And so, that was how I dealt with it, is the whole idea of how we deal with compost and put flowers in it.

So, that was more, again, how I dealt with it. And it's too nice of a way for some people, because they wanted to see the dirt and grime of it all. But I tend not to tackle things that way,

because even with my story on *I and I*, that piece, it was about an African wind goddess coming to see her people. So, that was what some of my friends would say, “How come she’s not dirty? She’s not—what kind of revolutionary, dirty—umph!” I was like, “That’s not how I see her! She’s a goddess!” You know? So, that’s my differentness.

And I used to always have a fight with a lot of the guys, because even if some of the guys who called themselves revolutionaries, and they would ally under, like, Communism, you know. And I would say, “I don’t like Communism.” And they were like, “Why?” Like, “I read the *Communist Manifesto*, and it said the lumpenproletariat lives off the state, and that’s my mama.” You know? So, how am I—you know, they’re saying that we’re—that’s the nastiness of the earth. And they were like, “Well, that’s not really—,” but I’m like, “That’s what I read. You know, I don’t know.” [Laughs] You know, you can say that he didn’t really mean your mama, but that’s what I read. [Laughs] You know?

DC: Right.

BC: And so, I don’t see what’s so good about that system. And then, when I met communists, they were more bureaucratic and harder, and not nice people, and they were very racist themselves. So, I mean, I didn’t see what was so good about that whole movement, and so I never aligned with it. And I’ve always liked—like I said, I’ve always—

[Recording ends at 2:07:24]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council